

PERCEPTIONS

*Understanding and Responding to
What People Think about Service-Learning*

Learning in Deed

Making a Difference Through Service-Learning

Introduction

In 1999, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation launched Learning In Deed , a national initiative that aims to make service to others an integral part of classroom learning in every school district across America. Building on a decade of experience in and support for service-learning programs, the Foundation will focus this multi-million dollar, four-year initiative on improving policy, practice, research and leadership by working with teachers, administrators, community members, students, parents, policymakers and national leaders. A key goal of this initiative is to support the field in its efforts to broaden the base of support for service-learning.

As a starting point, Learning In Deed gathered information through focus groups, a media scan and other sources to provide a snapshot of perceptions about service-learning.

Although our research indicates that service-learning is not widely known or understood by the general public, education *is* an issue that resonates with almost everyone. Understanding what the general public thinks about education can offer insight into communicating about service-learning.

This booklet is designed to provide a snapshot of perceptions about service-learning and suggestions for

responding to these perceptions. This “snapshot” was compiled over a period of several months in late 1998 and early 1999 using various types of opinion research. This document should not be considered a comprehensive study on public opinion about service-learning but rather initial findings that we hope will be useful to the field.

What do teachers and parents think?

In a recent survey of parents by Public Agenda*, the following were identified as major concerns regarding education:

- ◆ People think education is an important national issue and a large majority of parents say schools are an essential factor in raising children.
- ◆ Public confidence in public schools has declined since the 1970's.
- ◆ People say drugs, violence and drinking are serious problems in public schools.
- ◆ Employers and professors report recent graduates lack the basic academic skills needed for success at work or in college.
- ◆ Employers say kids are not prepared for the working world, but teachers think that their students have the needed skills.

Using the national survey as a starting point, Learning In Deed wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the public's awareness of and attitudes towards service-learning. To accomplish this, we conducted focus groups with urban and suburban parents and teachers. Focus group participants expressed their views on education, and more specifically, on service-learning.

Suburban and urban participants agreed that the breakdown of discipline is the most serious issue facing students, educators and communities.

Both groups described a range of social issues as more important challenges to education than the issues such as bureaucracy, budgets and curriculum.

What barriers do parents and teachers see to the implementation of service-learning?

When asked specifically about service-learning, the principal problem for most people was tactical: how can we create the infrastructure that makes service-learning possible without placing undue burden on schools, parents and teachers?

Teachers are suspicious that new service-learning initiatives, which impose administrative and time burdens on them, will be adopted by "higher ups" in the administration without adequate consultation.

Demonstrating how service-learning can be seamlessly incorporated into their teaching is the threshold issue for gaining teacher buy-in.

In addition, both parents and teachers expressed concerns that advocates need to address early in the process of communicating to these groups about service-learning:

- ◆ How will safety and adequate supervision of students be assured?
- ◆ What record-keeping and administrative requirements will be imposed on teachers?
- ◆ How will liability issues be addressed?
- ◆ What level of teacher/parent involvement will be required?
- ◆ Who chooses and approves activities?
- ◆ What resources will be made available?
- ◆ Will other budgets and priorities be affected?
- ◆ Will administrative support be provided to coordinate programs and train teachers?
- ◆ How will this interact with standards and how will outcomes be measured?

What does the media say about service-learning?

Initial research indicates that media are generally unaware of service-learning, and when they are aware, they are not properly informed. To take a closer look, Learning In Deed conducted a media scan. We reviewed a total of 186 articles about service-learning written in the past two years to determine the types of publications that mention service-learning and how the media describes the term. From the scan, we were able to:

- ◆ note journalists covering service-learning at major papers (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, etc.);
- ◆ learn more about the media's common misperceptions of service-learning; and
- ◆ establish a baseline understanding of the current state of media coverage.

In general, we found that service-learning, however it is defined, is not "top of mind" among issues for journalists who cover education. At the same time, a significant amount of information is being written about the issue, and some of it is not as informed as it should be.

Even uninformed coverage on the issue, however, was generally positive. Over half of the articles described service-learning in a favorable way. Only four percent were against, while the remainder of the coverage was neutral.

Our analysis revealed that articles written on K-12 service-learning highlighted the civic education and positive youth development benefits, whereas the higher education articles focused on academic achievement results. Most articles focused predominantly on the volunteer aspects of service-learning. This finding illustrates the need to educate the media on the academic benefits of K-12 service-learning.

Definition of Service-Learning

Of the articles reviewed:

- ◆ 41% had accurate definitions;
- ◆ 46% had no definition; and
- ◆ 11% had inaccurate definitions.

Benefits of Service-Learning

Of the articles reviewed:

- ◆ 5% pertained to standards, assessment and accountability;
- ◆ 30% focused on improving local community-school relations;
- ◆ 30% pertained to school-community partnerships;
- ◆ 13% pertained to positive youth development; and
- ◆ 35% pertained to civic education.

One of our most significant communications challenges is distinguishing service-learning from mandatory community service. Twenty percent of the articles reviewed confused service-learning with mandatory community service. The confusion with mandatory service generated the most negative stories, opinion editorials and letters to the editor. The key to communicating about service-learning is to create an identity separate from mandated service and, through the media, educate the public about the benefits and attributes of service-learning.

What are the misperceptions about service-learning?

Because a large number of parents are uninformed, many educators are not convinced and few policymakers are on-board, misperceptions of service-learning abound. Because the term “service-learning” is not well-known, the concept is easily misunderstood. Some of the most common misperceptions about service-learning are:

- ♦ service-learning and mandatory service are the same thing;
- ♦ service-learning activities benefit only the students involved, not the communities or populations served;

- ♦ service-learning provides cheap labor for nonprofit organizations, but does not really benefit the students participating;
- ♦ service-learning is an “add-on” and a burden to teachers;
- ♦ service-learning is not “real learning”;
- ♦ service-learning is only for certain groups of kids — either youth at risk or gifted/talented students;
- ♦ service-learning is limited to only social studies or religion classes; and
- ♦ service-learning is the next education “fad of the month.”

What are the critics saying about service-learning?

Arguments against service-learning can be grouped into the following four broad categories.

Back to basics

Some do not see service-learning as having real academic value, but rather as something that takes students out of the classroom and distracts them from “the basics.”

“Why doesn’t the Oakland school system spend a little more time teaching students how to read and write, and a little less time trying to make them ‘volunteers’ against their will.” — Letter to the Editor, *San Francisco Examiner*, 3/6/98

“The plan by the Chicago Board of Education to make public service mandatory for high school students is yet one more indication of the intellectual bankruptcy of the public school system. At a time when nearly half of all incoming college freshmen require remedial math or reading classes, it is the height of absurdity to siphon more time and energy from the basic skills required for college and the workplace.” — Letter to the Editor, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, 9/6/98

Values should be taught at home

Some criticize service-learning for subordinating the role of parents in teaching their children about service, responsibility and caring.

“I don’t think it’s the school’s job to teach values. I completely disagree with that. The parents should be the primary source of values.” — Steve, parent, Hilliard (OH) School District

Safety

Some critics think that service-learning activities pose safety threats to youth and expose young people to serious social issues, such as homelessness and hunger, which they may not be prepared to handle. Many are concerned about the liability issues associated with taking students off-campus.

“My only concern is your basic safety issues. I’m uncomfortable with my sixth grade daughter going places with people who I have no idea who they are and what the heck they are doing there and so I have concerns on that level.” — Cliff, parent, Worthington (OH) School District

Involuntary Servitude

Service-learning, when confused with mandatory service, is often classified as “involuntary servitude” and therefore, unconstitutional.

In relation to this issue, a series of articles and opinion editorials ran in the Baltimore and Annapolis papers that claimed service-learning was a waste of time because kids were “forced” to do mindless tasks in order to complete the hours (scraping gum off desks, stuffing envelopes, *etc.*). Similar criticism was aimed at teachers who advocated “infusion,” the practice of helping students finish their community service requirement by creating in-class “volunteer” activities such as letter-writing campaigns. Critics argued that such activities are distractions from the “basics” of education, and although kids should be encouraged to do community service outside of school, they should not be forced to do it during school hours.

Most criticism of service-learning is based on the misperceptions outlined above. We learned from our focus groups and other research that once people fully understand service-learning, however, most are generally supportive of it.

What appeals to people about service-learning?

Focus group participants identified many appealing aspects of service-learning. These aspects can be grouped into four categories.

Impart practical experience

Parents especially liked service-learning's ability to better prepare children for life's challenges. Potential for learning skills such as problem-solving and working in groups appeals to both teachers and parents.

"Service-learning is the best of both worlds. You are learning technology, building skills...and how to work with people." — Tyra, teacher, Baltimore (MD) City Schools

Improve academic performance

Linking service-learning programs to basic educational priorities significantly eased concerns and enhanced

support for making it part of the regular curriculum. Connecting service-learning activities to core curricula and requiring children to engage in academic analysis (or reflection) after the fact rendered criticism of service-learning by some in the focus groups completely ineffective.

Continued support of service-learning among both parents and teachers is dependent on the demonstrable educational value — especially when confronted with the need to establish priorities.

"My experience with my sons doing service-learning is that they're not losing anything in terms of reading or writing. They're comprehending what they did."

— Rose, parent, Baltimore (MD) City Schools

Create better citizens

Especially for parents, teaching things like values and respect is more important than academics alone. Participants claimed that the "learning" part of service-learning is most important, yet when asked to describe the benefits they see to service-learning, they focused on the service being performed for people or the community and how participation in that service will enrich children in non-academic ways.

“They (students) learn to give back to their community. They learn not to be takers. It’s a community we all live in, they need to give something...what you put into life is what you get out of it. ” — Norma, parent, Baltimore (MD) City Schools

Aid in personal development

Especially in urban schools, parents and teachers are looking for strategies to help young people develop personal skills. They see the potential for service-learning to help teach:

- ◆ pride and self-esteem;
- ◆ humanity and empathy;
- ◆ social skills and how to get along with others;
- ◆ caring for someone and bonding; and
- ◆ responsibility and discipline.

Essentially, these focus groups indicate that the parents will be the easy sell. Teachers, on the other hand, were much more practical and quickly fell back on their negative experience with the district bureaucracy as they began to assess how aggressively they might like to pursue service-learning initiatives.

How should we respond to perceptions?

Now that you understand the perceptions of service-

learning, how should you respond? Following are messages, strategies and tips for communicating effectively about service-learning to parents, teachers, policymakers and the media.

Messages

It’s vital to spend time thinking about messaging. In other words, what do you want people to know and understand about service-learning in your school/district/state? You should develop one to three key messages that capture the essence of what service-learning is, and what benefits it imparts.

Make sure your messages resonate with what people say appeals to them about

How do people describe a “good” service-learning program?

- ◆ Service-learning should be voluntary.
- ◆ Teachers should be involved in planning and implementation.
- ◆ Activities should link with core curriculum.
- ◆ Community partners should be involved.
- ◆ Include research that demonstrates accountability for meeting standards.
- ◆ The “harder” the subject to which service-learning activities are connected, the easier it is to justify the program.
- ◆ Management should be school-based.
- ◆ Make resources easily identifiable and accessible.
- ◆ Time for related student reports and academic work should be built into the schedule.
- ◆ Keep the administrative requirements light.

service-learning, and avoid reinforcing the misperceptions of service-learning.

A good example of messaging is the following:

“The article missed the boat on making clear delineations among ‘service-learning’, ‘community service’ and ‘volunteerism,’ distinct terms that were used interchangeably throughout the article... Service-learning is a teaching strategy, it is not about fulfilling community service hour requirements or establishing separate community service courses. Service-learning provides students the opportunity to add value to projects by activities that meet authentic community needs.” — Letter to the Editor, *San Francisco Examiner*, 3/6/98

Evidence

Make sure you base your messages on proof, or evidence. While more evidence documenting the benefits of service-learning is certainly needed, several solid studies are available. Below are some statistics which provide evidence on the benefits of service-learning that parents and teachers indicated are most appealing to them:

- ◆ Florida has gathered data on service-learning for the last three academic years, each year consistently reporting strong improvement in three key areas: attendance, grades and conduct... Attendance improved in 83 percent of

reporting sites...80 percent had fewer discipline referrals...76 percent of the students improved in grade point average (GPA). For those students characterized as at risk...89 percent showed improved attendance...89 percent showed fewer discipline referrals...88 percent showed improved GPA. *Florida Learn and Serve K-12 Report-Executive Summary*

- ◆ Service-learning participants scored significantly higher than comparison group members on four out of 10 measures of educational impact: school engagement, school grades (math, social studies, science), core GPA (English, math, social studies, science) and educational aspirations (desire to graduate from college). *Learn and Serve America, Brandeis University Study, 1997*
- ◆ Among students participating in service-learning, 87 percent reported having learned a new skill that they believed they would be valuable in the future. *Learn and Serve America, Brandeis University Study, 1997*
- ◆ Service-learning participants showed enhanced civic attitudes in terms of a self-report measure of personal and social responsibility. *Learn and Serve America, Brandeis University Study, 1997*

Strategy

It is also critical to think through messengers, timing, national initiatives to link to, and the environment in which you are communicating.

Messengers

Using students to deliver messages to adults has been shown to be particularly effective, as evidenced by a Public Agenda survey entitled, “Challenge Me.” The survey found that 75 percent of students said they would study harder if more was expected of them. The resulting campaign has been particularly effective in part because in it, students speak for themselves. In addition, bringing teacher organizations into the process early is important to communicating about service-learning.

Timing

Although education commands widespread media attention practically year-round, it is a good idea to keep hot-button times in mind, such as back-to-school, graduation and American Education Week (November). If certain “hot” topics in the media pertain to your activities, make sure your voice is included in the media coverage. Examples include citizen service, community/business partnerships with schools and issues surrounding

youth academic performance. The “hot” topic could also be an event, such as National Volunteer Week.

National Initiatives

While local stories sell newspapers, having a national initiative to help bolster your story or provide a national angle to your mission can also be attractive to the media. You can tell your story in the context of the Learning In Deed initiative of the Kellogg Foundation in the following way:

The Kellogg Foundation has recently launched a national initiative to promote service-learning across America. The Kellogg Foundation hopes that every student in America will have an opportunity to take part in the type of service-learning activity we have here in [your community].

Environment

Consider the context in which you are planning to pitch your story. If local coverage of education in your community focuses on tougher tests, describe how service-learning can help students succeed in a challenging academic environment. If the buzz is about safety and discipline issues, describe how service-learning can help reconnect youth to communities. If your community is focusing on lack of resources for schools and the community, describe how service-learning can help fill a void in meeting community needs.

No Jargon!

Use clear language to describe service-learning and practice describing it concisely. You should be able to accurately describe service-learning in 30-seconds or less. This will serve you well in terms of media relations, as well as community relations.

Arm yourself with excellent examples of service-learning and think in terms of results. Know about excellent programs in your community and beyond, and communicate their effectiveness by telling how students and the community benefit from them.

For example:

Service-learning programs engage young people in community activities where academic skills are used to solve real-life problems. At the same time, program activities help students understand the meaning of citizenship and their ability to help determine the quality of life in their communities.

— Learn and Serve America brochure

Top ten ways to communicate about service-learning:

1. Let students tell the story.
2. Provide accurate visual descriptions of programs.
3. Describe service-learning in a 30-second sound bite.
4. Time your messages to coincide with larger education events.
5. Make it relevant to the issues people care about in your community.
6. Tie your program to a national initiative.
7. Do your homework — gather evidence or “proof” that service-learning works.
8. Know your critics’ arguments and be prepared to counter them.
9. Build alliances with organizations, both school-based and community-based, that have similar interests.
10. Be patient and persistent — changing perceptions takes time.



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